

0.2% A miniscule number, meaningless even, basically impossible. Having a 0.2% chance of doing anything is pretty much saying it's just not going to happen. Those are the kind of odds a team has of winning with ten seconds left in a game they are losing. It's barely worth mentioning, and yet, 0.2% is my current favorite kind of odds, because it turns out, it's actually not impossible. It's close, but it's not impossible.

You see this isn't some random number I pulled out of the air. On August 10 of this year, the Detroit Tigers had 0.2% chance of making the baseball playoffs. They were 10 games out of a spot and 8 games under .500. It seemed stupid to even give them odds on making the playoffs. And yet...in the words of our television broadcaster Jason Bennett, "In a city that doesn't believe in odds, they have a baseball team to match." Words that will go down in Detroit history, because from August 10th on, my Tigers went on a tear. 31 wins and 10 losses. And suddenly by the end of the season, those odds were no longer impossible, those odds were a guarantee, and this team lit their way into the playoffs when no one expected them to. A team with an average age in their early 20's, a playoff lineup whose combined salary made less than one pitcher on the Houston Astros, the odds seemed pointless to even mention, and yet at the end of the day, at the end of the season, 0.2% still meant...they had a chance...they just had to take it.

Our gospel today feels a bit like a 0.2% gospel. It like Jesus is setting the divine betting odds of anyone getting into the kingdom of heaven and those odds look pretty impossible and not even worth mentioning, but we're getting ahead of ourselves. What's going on here? Over the last few weeks, Jesus has been trying to get across one major message to the disciples: it's not about you! It's not about your reward, it's not about your status, it's not about which one of you is the best, it's about the kingdom, it's about the work, it's about welcoming in the literal children of God, the lost, the lonely, the forgotten, the forsaken. It's been a lesson in ego over and over again and this week those lessons continue, but for someone outside of the twelve.

Jesus is getting ready to hit the road and Mark tells us a man runs up to him with a question. Now, given the nature of the conversation that is about to go down, I think it's a safe assumption to make that Jesus and this man know each other, there's a history, this isn't some first time, random encounter. Jesus seems to know this man's heart, his intentions, and his life; he seems like he's on the cusp of a major life decision, because in Mark, Jesus only tells people who are on the cusp of discipleship to "follow me," and that's what he is about to say to this man, so big things seem to be brewing in his life, in his faith, and in his relationship with Jesus.

So Jesus is getting ready to leave and this guy runs up and you have to wonder if this is like the final question in an ongoing conversation, like he's been up all night wrestling with what comes next for him. He wants to be sure that whatever journey he's about to take, he can do it, that he's on the right path and that it will be worth it in the end. He asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. No small question that, but if he's anticipating following Jesus, he might be imagining that that will be the answer, follow me and we've got ya covered. But this is Jesus and this is discipleship and nothing is ever that easy.

Jesus looks at him and tells him, you know the commandments, you know what you're supposed to do, and the guy is like, yeah, I know and I've done all of those since I was a kid. Let's take a timeout here and acknowledge that that right there is basically impossible. The odds of keeping *all* the commandments from the time you were a kid? 0.2%. What teenager hasn't failed at the whole honor thy parents thing at least once? So, this is a questionable declaration, *but* it shows where his heart is. He takes his faith seriously, his devotion to God seriously. He knows the law and knows the demands it makes on his heart and he's dedicated to following it, even when it's difficult.

And this is where the whole, these guys have to know each other, thing comes into play because Mark tells us Jesus looked at him and loved him. The Greek here is that Jesus has compassion for him, he literally feels gut-wrenched for him, because Jesus *knows* him. The commandments aren't the issue. His faith isn't even the issue. But where his heart truly lies? That's going to be the issue. Jesus tells him that he is so close to being ready, but before he can turn and follow, he has to let go of his stuff, and we're not talking about like emotional baggage here, we're talking about his literal stuff. Jesus tells him to go and sell what he owns, give it to the poor, and then follow. And we're kind of left hanging to fill in the blanks. The man goes away grieving because he has many possessions...and that's the last we hear of him. Is he grieving because he's willing to do what Jesus asked? Is it because he knows Jesus has just asked him to do the one thing he can't? Is he grieving the loss of his stuff or the loss of his ability to follow Jesus? Has he realized just how deeply his allegiances have been divided when for so long he thought he was on the right track?

What follows is Jesus making this whole thing sound impossible. Camels and eyes of needles. And God bless the disciples they ask the right question! In the face of 0.2% odds who can be saved? And of course here comes Peter, the Detroit Tigers of the disciples. Me, Jesus!! We already

gave up our stuff!! Tell us we're saved!! We beat the odds!! And per usual Jesus has to turn it around...the first shall be last, the last shall be first. Tone down the exuberance there Peter, because at the end of the day, this isn't about them beating the odds. This is about God. In a world that doesn't believe in odds, they have a God to match. None of this sounds possible, and yet...for God all things are possible.

And this backs us into a corner a little bit, right? Because on the one hand, you have Jesus saying our dedication, our worship of our wealth is a big ole problem, and on the other hand, he's saying this is all impossible, but thankfully for God everything is possible so don't worry about your salvation. And that right there is the key...having the assurance, the promise, the 100% guaranteed odds of our salvation, doesn't mean that the rest of it becomes irrelevant or not a problem or something that can just be ignored. Was the rich man's salvation assured? Yes. Did he need to come to terms with how his dedication to his wealth impacted his relationship with God and his call to discipleship? Yes. And that's where this lesson just catches us right in the gut because boy do we only want to deal with one of those questions and not the other.

We without a doubt want to hear the assurance that our salvation is a God issue and is completely taken care of. All things are possible with God,

which means that our messy, complicated, frustrating selves are going to be welcomed into the kingdom of God where a place has been prepared.

Alleluia and amen and thank God. But that assurance doesn't let us off the hook for all the other things God calls us to do, even if those things feel impossible to wrestle with.

So no, Jesus wasn't just exaggerating to make a point about our relationship with wealth. Our dedication, our *adoration* of possessions, of looking the best, of hoarding all we can just in case, while the economic gap increases is a God issue. When we rant and rave about the ridiculousness of increasing minimum wage, because that's certainly not what *we* worked for, while also not balancing that with anger about the rising costs of housing, the flat out housing crisis we are in, the overwhelming cost of higher education, and the weight of student debt cost, that's a God's justice issue. If Amos were around today, he wouldn't be lamenting levies of grain, but levies on loans, the wild amount of interest that we charge on any number of things which makes everything harder to survive. When we have no problem building bigger and bigger houses, because we have an absolute need for a family room, a living room, a den, and an office space, but then give zero consideration for the people living in tents as we drive to church,

that is a God's justice issue. Amos would be talking about the built houses of hewn stone that we won't be able to live in.

We so desperately want to keep our finances, our wealth, our economic agenda over here, and our faith over here, saying there is a 0.2% chance that those things have anything to do with each other, and yet Jesus tells us over and over again that they have everything to do with each other. You cannot love your money and love God at the same time. Having money, being wealthy is not the problem, but worshipping it, prioritizing it over our neighbors, wanting more for ourselves even if it means less for others, that's the problem. Being unable to fathom giving up anything from our own lives for the sake of another, that's the problem. It is useless to pretend that God isn't concerned about economic justice and it's useless to pretend that Jesus just didn't mean what he's saying because it makes us uncomfortable.

It feels impossible, like the problems of the world are too big for us to handle or deal with, but every little percentage of help makes a difference. Be someone's 0.2% chance, be the person that puts faith over funds, be the person that sees your neighbor through the eyes of God not the eyes of what it costs to help them. In a world that cares far too much about odds, be the child of God who refuses to match them, and make a difference with the 0.2% you've got. **AMEN!!!**